



New Study Looks At Tolling Possibilities

Transportation Commission investigates how tolling could be used to help build new roads and bridges and manage traffic congestion in Washington State.

Olympia, Washington – The Washington State Transportation Commission has launched a comprehensive study of the feasibility of using tolls to help fund construction of badly needed new highways and bridges and to better manage traffic congestion in the state.

"The Commission's goal is to study creative ways to finance new construction and keep traffic moving with tolls collected from the people who actually benefit from using the new or improved facilities," said Commissioner Richard Ford, who chairs the committee that is overseeing the study.

"Tolling to build new roads and bridges, to make better use of existing roadways and to manage congestion is receiving lots of attention nationally," said Mr. Ford. "Tolls are not new to Washington; it's the way that we have traditionally financed the construction of bridges in the state. Combined with new electronic systems, it is also a way to make better use of existing roads and to provide new choices for commuters."

The study was launched in response to legislation passed earlier this year directing the Commission to study the feasibility of using tolls to finance construction of transportation facilities and to manage congestion across Washington. The study will also establish a framework for uniformly implementing tolling in the state, should the legislature decide to do so, and will look at alternative tolling policies on the new span of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge.

Nationally, states are faced with increasing traffic, decaying infrastructure and fewer dollars for alleviating congestion. "In Washington, our roads are our communities' lifeblood. They are important to our quality of life, and they are mission-critical to maintaining our competitive position as a trade-dependent economy," said Mr. Ford.

Mr. Ford noted that 15 state bridges have been constructed using tolls since 1940. "We have traditionally financed the construction of new bridges in Washington with tolls," he said. "Clearly there are more needed projects out there than we have resources available to build. Many of these projects could be accelerated to meet our current transportation needs if only we could find the money to build them. That's where the feasibility of using tolls comes in."

In addition to new construction, several states, including Minnesota, Texas and California are making better use of roadway capacity by using tolls to manage congestion. In some areas, new express lanes have been built in existing medians and in others, underused carpool (HOV) lanes have been converted to High Occupancy Toll or HOT lanes.

These programs allow solo drivers, who choose to do so, to install a small electronic toll-collection device and use the lanes for a fee; carpoolers, motorcyclists and transit buses usually ride for free. Tolls are priced so that traffic in the lanes stays free flowing.

"These programs have met with considerable success and are popular with carpoolers, solo motorists and people from all walks of life," said Mr. Ford. "We are going to take a close look at the potential contribution these programs can make to keep Washington moving." Other states such as Oregon, Georgia and Virginia are considering similar programs.

The Commission chose a team of national and local transportation experts led by Cambridge Systematics, Inc. of Cambridge, Massachusetts to conduct the \$1 million study. The study will broadly address tolling in Washington, current and emerging technologies, social and environmental impacts, and legal and regulatory constraints. The study will also help the Commission to identify candidate projects for tolling and develop a decision-making framework for evaluating future projects.

The study will publish an interim report in January 2006 to be used by legislators in the 2006 legislative session. The final report will come in July 2006.

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